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CORNEILLE'S *ILLUSION COMIQUE*, MAHELOT'S  
*MÉMOIRE*, AND RAMPALLE'S *BÉLINDE*

By H. CARRINGTON LANCASTER

Since 1878 the following list of scenery and properties from the portion of the stage-decorators' *Mémoire* written by Mahelot has been supposed to refer to the *Illusion comique*:

La Melite.

Au milieu, il faut un palais bien orné. A un costé du theatre, un antre pour un magicien au dessus d'une montaigne. De l'autre costé du theatre, un parc. Au premier acte, une nuit, une lune qui marche, des rossignols, un miroir enchanté, une baguette pour le magicien; des carquans ou menottes, des trompettes; des cornets de papier, un chapeau de cipres pour le magicien.<sup>1</sup>

When he made out this list in 1633 or 1634, Mahelot failed to name the author of the play to which it referred. Subsequently an inaccurate scribe added in the margin the name of Corneille, evidently believing that the list had to do with his first comedy. But Émile Perrin<sup>2</sup> noted that Corneille's *Mélite* is a city play, without the magician, forest, or other items that characterize this list, and he consequently rejected this identification. But, still believing, despite the fact that he had no evidence except that of the unreliable marginal note, that Mahelot had in mind some play by Corneille, he set about looking for it till he fixed upon the *Illusion comique*, which does, indeed, require some of the scenery mentioned by the decorator. He was so sure that this identification was correct that he reproduced for the Exposition Universelle of 1878 the sketch which accompanies the list in the manuscript to show how the stage was set for the representation of the *Illusion*.

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoire de Laurent Mahelot et de Michel Laurent*, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. 24330, fonds fr., folios 34, 35. I have inserted the punctuation. Mahelot makes use of none. My edition of this MS., now in press, will appear shortly at Champion's, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Étude de la mise en scène*, preface to *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique*, 8th year, pp. xxvii-xxix.

His *maquette* reappeared with the same title in the standard history of French literature.<sup>3</sup>

Manzius,<sup>4</sup> however, refused to accept Perrin's theory, on the ground that the *Illusion* was probably not originally acted at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the theater for which Mahelot worked. He based this conclusion on the fact that Matamore, one of the characters in the *Illusion*, bears the stage name of an actor at the rival theater of the Marais<sup>5</sup> and that Corneille, as far as we have any information on the subject, gave his early plays to this younger troop.<sup>6</sup> What is more important is the fact that Mahelot never makes a mistake about the titles of his lists. In the few cases in which he refers to a printed play by some other title than that by which it is known to us, he invariably uses for this title the name of a person or a place that figures prominently in the plot.<sup>7</sup> If then, in spite of this evidence, we are to accept Perrin's hypothesis that, when Mahelot entitled his list *Mélite*, he was referring to the *Illusion*, which has no character of this name, we must find the most exact correspondence between the scenery and properties of the play and those of the list. Can this be said to be the case?

In the *Illusion* there is, indeed, a magician who lives in a cave and uses a wand; a garden or park; a house or palace; but night comes in the third act, not in the first,<sup>8</sup> and there is no mention of the *lune qui marche*, the *rossignols*, the *miroir enchanté*, the *carquans ou menottes*, the *trompettes*, or the *cornets de papier*;

<sup>3</sup> *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française*, edited by Petit de Julleville, iv, 270.

<sup>4</sup> *History of Theatrical Art*, translated by Louise von Cossel, London, 1903, II, 339, 340.

<sup>5</sup> This is better evidence than that furnished by the line from the *Illusion*, I, 3, where a character is mentioned as composing "des chansons pour Gaultier, des pointes pour Guillaume," for these actors were so well known that, though they played at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, a reference to them might easily be made on a rival stage. Cf. Rigal, *Alexandre Hardy*, Paris, Hachette, 1889, p. 685.

<sup>6</sup> He certainly did so in the case of *Mélite*, *Médée*, the *Cid*.

<sup>7</sup> He refers to Beys's *Jaloux sans sujet* as *Clarice*, using the name of the heroine.

<sup>8</sup> Rigal, *loc. cit.*, holds that the first act of the *Illusion* takes place at night, but Corneille's text does not support him. He makes no explanation of the fact that there is a direct reference to night in the *Illusion*, III, 7, line 864.

while on the other hand, the *Illusion* requires a prison and a table on which money is counted and costumes displayed, to which Mahelot does not refer. Rigal<sup>9</sup> tries to explain these discrepancies by arguing that the magic mirror, as well as the hat, would be naturally found in the possession of the magician; that the "*rossignols* pouvaient chanter dans le parc au cours des scènes d'amour, les *trompettes* annoncer l'attaque soudaine de l'acte V, sc. 3, les cornets de papier servir aux comptes des comédiens, acte V, sc. 5." He argues further that the *carcans ou menottes* may be used as a substitute for the prison, but says nothing about the articles mentioned in the *Illusion* which do not appear in Mahelot's list.

Even if there were no change of title, I should hesitate to accept the visibly moving moon as an "accessoire naturel" of night,<sup>10</sup> *cornets* as needed in the counting of money, *carcans ou menottes* as a substitute for a prison, for nowhere else in the *Mémoire* can examples of such usage be found, though night and prisons are mentioned frequently enough and money is twice represented by *jetons*. There is, in short, too much to be explained as to scenery and properties as well as to title and place of representation for us to accept Perrin's identification.

I formed this opinion a few years ago while preparing an edition of the *Mémoire*. I concluded that there was not sufficient evidence to identify the list and that it might well refer to one of a score of lost plays known to have been represented at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Then I ran across in the Widener Library a play called *Bélinde*, written by Rampalle and published at Lyons in 1630, a work so little known and so poorly analyzed by historians of the French theater that nobody had thought of comparing it with Mahelot's list.

The first thing that struck me was the presence in the play of a princess called Mélite. On investigation she proved to be quite as important as the other princess, Bélinde, so that her name would make quite as suitable a title for the play. The piece con-

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Nor can it be argued that the magician makes the moon move to show his power, for in line 56 of the *Illusion* he says to Pridamant, "Vous n'avez pas besoin de miracles pareils," and expresses his contempt in lines 127-133 for those of his colleagues who make use of them.

tains a palace, a wood, a magician and his cavern. Night falls during the first act. The magician could and probably did make the moon move, for he says,<sup>11</sup> shortly before casting a spell:

C'est dans ce mesme bois que mes charmes terribles . . .  
Obscurcissent la lune et font paslir les astres.

The magician refers <sup>12</sup> to "ce miroir diuin par mon art enchanté." In the last scene of the play the king sets the hero free with the words, "qu'on destache vos fers." Trumpets would naturally be used at the entrance of the king,<sup>13</sup> returning from a victory and surrounded by his guards. The presence of the wand and the hat is easily understood, as they form a part of the magician's ordinary equipment. The *cornets de papier* remained a mystery till I noted a reference <sup>14</sup> to a magic powder, used by the magician for his spell and held, of course, in some container. The use of a *cornet* for such a purpose will not surprise anyone who reads of a *cornet d'encens* in the list for the first *journée* of Hardy's *Pandoste*.

The only difficulty is offered by the presence of nightingales, whose song appears to be substituted for the cries mentioned in the following lines: <sup>15</sup>

Le cry malencontreux des funestes hibous,  
Le triste aboy des chiens, et l'hurlement des loups,  
M'obligent à sortir de ma noire caverne.

It should be noted that the essential thing was to draw the magician from his cave by sounds uttered at night. This feat accomplished, the animals had no further rôle to play. As the usual night cry referred to in the *Mémoire* is that of the nightingale, the decorator may have preferred to reproduce this sound rather than to follow the printed text. For the omission of dogs' barking he furnishes a parallel in his list for Hardy's *Belle Égyptienne*. One must always consider the possibility of slight differences between the text used by the actors, for whom Mahelot worked, and that of the published plays, with which we are acquainted. If one ignores this fact, he will identify few of Mahelot's lists.

<sup>11</sup> I, 2. The moon may have been represented also in the first scene as passing behind clouds, for the hero declares that "la lune . . . a couuert d'un brouillars sa corne qui luisoit."

<sup>12</sup> I, 2.

<sup>13</sup> I, 2.

<sup>14</sup> V, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

The identification that I propose is, indeed, quite as satisfactorily established as is that of most lists in the *Mémoire*. It may be that Rampalle first called his play *Bélinde* and published it under that name in 1630, but that, after the representation of Corneille's *Mélite* early in the same year by the troop of the Marais, the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne preferred to change the name of Rampalle's play to *Mélite* in order to compete with their rivals more satisfactorily, just as we find, later on, Corneille's *Rodogune* and Racine's *Phèdre* opposed by plays of the same name given on another stage.

However this may have been, there is no doubt about the fact that in writing a list of scenery and properties for *Mélite*, Mahelot did not have in mind the *Illusion comique*, but an older play, the *Bélinde* or *Mélite* of Rampalle. There is no evidence that Mahelot anywhere referred to a play written by Corneille.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Corneille's plays figure prominently in the *Mémoire*, but only in the portions written by other decorators in 1646-47 and later years. Indeed, the fact that the *Illusion* was subsequently referred to is another reason for believing that its requirements had not already been listed by Mahelot.